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Exploring the Social Representations of Roma in Online Hate Speech: findings from a preliminary study

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Abstract

The aim of the present research is to analyze online hate speech comments located in the most and least popular social media in Greece, regarding the representation of the Roma minority. Through the analysis of 4,369 comments, based on the Qualitative Content Analysis method, the study resulted in four distinct social representations that reflect the following four topics: national identity, language, education and social inclusion. The main conclusions indicate that Roma are mostly characterized as gypsies, while the ideological code “Us” and “Them” is obvious, reflecting the perceived superiority-inferiority that fuels discrimination, inequality and ultimately hate speech. Finally, the hate speech narratives seem to have internalised neoliberalism, as they neglect a reference to the primary responsibility of the State for addressing the social inequalities that Roma face and relocate this responsibility to the minority group which becomes even more minoritized.

Keywords: anti-gypsyism, racism, social media, stereotypes, social inclusion.

Introduction

The growing use of the Internet along with the consequent variety of social media have multiplied the opportunities for interpersonal communication and information exchange. In fact, Walther (1996) proposed the terms “hyper-communication” or “hyperpersonal communication” to describe the interaction that takes place in virtual spaces, and which is *easy*, as it does not require a high level of expertise to achieve a satisfactory result, *entertaining*, because it is a new form of entertainment for many Internet users, *wide*, as it takes place across multiple groups of people and through various channels and *intense*, due to the time and degree required for participation. However, Web 2.0 is a new virtual, interactive, participatory, and collaborative space that allows users to create, modify, and share content (O'Reilly, 2007), features that did not exist in Web 1.0. Under this perspective, the widespread use of the Internet promotes not only freedom of speech, but also the creation and dissemination of potentially harmful information, often regarded as “hate speech”.

Despite the existence of several European policies, initiatives as well as of national laws protecting minorities from hate speech, the reports issued by the European Union Fundamental Rights (2020) and the Amnesty International (2020) underline that Roma remain one of the most disadvantaged groups in Europe that still faces serious obstacles with regards to their social inclusion. The reality in Greece is pretty much similar, despite the measures taken under the National Strategic Framework for Roma (Ministry of Labor

and Social Security, 2011) and the updated Action Plan for the National Roma Integration Strategy (Ministry of Labour, Social Insurance and Social Solidarity, 2019).

Considering these two issues in conjunction, along with the fact that social media and technology in general can easily transform traditional settings into digital, fundamental questions arise as to whether people display an appropriate and responsible behavior not only as democratic citizens but also as digital citizens (“netizens”) (Frau-Meigs, O’Neill, Soriani & Tomé, 2017). Therefore, the main objective of this study is to present and discuss some initial data on the representations of Roma, based on retrieved comments found on the most and least used social media in Greece. The novelty of the study lies in filling the research gap regarding the mapping of negative social representations of Roma on digital platforms.

Online Hate Speech and the Roma Minority

According to McGonagle (2013) there is not, yet, a universally accepted definition of the term “hate speech”, something that implies further investigation on the ways that hatred is expressed and conceptualised. To this end, the European Agency for Fundamental Rights has set, in the context of the Framework Decision on Racism and Xenophobia, a number of priorities, including the growing use of the Internet as a tool of hatred and propaganda (FRA, 2013). The use of the Internet and of various social media such as Twitter, Facebook, TikTok and YouTube offer people the opportunity to communicate ideas, beliefs, feelings and any other form of information with each other, interspersed with multimodal elements (text, images, videos). However, this freedom of speech may be one of the reasons for triggering hate speech and therefore the latter may be considered a descendant of the former (Chetty & Alathur, 2018). At the same time, it is noteworthy that social media work as polarization channels (De Smedt, Jaki, Kotzé, Saoud, Gwózdź, De Pauw & Daelemans, 2018), which allow individuals to express more extreme views compared to face-to-face interactions. Therefore, anyone who has access to the Internet can potentially create and spread hate content that affects a large number of people in a very short period of time (Miškolci, Kováčová & Rigová, 2018), elements that reflect the ease of disseminating and diffusing online hate speech.

To this respect, the present study examines in specific hate speech against the Roma minority in Greece. According to the estimates of the Council of Europe, there are approximately 265,000 Roma living in Greece, representing 2.47% of the population. According to the National Strategic Framework for Roma (Ministry of Labor and Social Security, 2011), this minority is susceptible to multiple forms of social exclusion in the areas of housing, employment, health and education, which are further confirmed in the current update of the National Strategy for Roma Inclusion (Ministry of Labour, Social Insurance and Social Solidarity, 2019). Regarding education, the first official reference to Roma was made in two state documents in 1987 (Ntousas, 1997), indicating a rather delayed response. Also, in the research conducted by Pappa and her colleagues (2015), the researchers inquired the role of socio-economic characteristics and housing conditions on the quality of life related to health (HRQL) for the Greek Roma minority. The results showed that gender, age, education, chronic illness, stable housing and material deprivation were key determinants of Roma’s quality of life. Additionally, the researchers suggested that adopting integrated and holistic policies, including interventions in education, housing and public health may constitute a positive step (Pappa et al., 2015).

In 2007, Scicluna studied the mechanism of anti-Roma hate speech in Europe, as articulated by senior officials, including ministers and other politicians. In his article, Scicluna concluded that Roma are perceived as an object of ridicule, a public danger and a useless burden, while hate speech also included statements reflecting the concealment, elimination and limitation of their number (Scicluna, 2007). In another study conducted in Slovakia, it was found that Roma are considered as privileged, asocial and criminals that receive high social benefits and are unwilling to work or attend schools. In addition, Roma are not conceptualised as human beings, rather as animals (e.g. rats), while references are made to the high birth rates followed by extremist proposals, such as beating, killing and concentrating them in labor camps (Miškolci, Kováčová & Rigová, 2018). Even in the recent report of the European Roma Rights Center, citizens of 12 European countries blame Roma for the spread of the Covid-19 virus in their countries (European Roma Rights Center, 2020). Therefore, such conditions and perceptions reflect the urgent need to become increasingly concerned about the fragility of our democracies (Heggart & Flowers, 2019).

Methodology

The study presents the content of online hate speech targeting the Roma minority in Greece, as extracted from comments in two social media, Facebook and YouTube. In May 2020, Facebook was the most used social media in Greece (90.52%), while YouTube (1.11%) one of the least used (Statcounter, 2020).

The selection of these social media reflects our intention to look for content that can be retrieved not only from mainstream, but also from less popular communication channels. By adopting a retrospective approach, we searched for posts and comments on Facebook, as well as comments on YouTube videos referring to the Roma minority. By using concrete keywords, such as Roma, gypsies and Greek alternatives (e.g., "tsigganoi") in the search function of the social media, the researchers located user posts in diverse thematic groups or users comments in videos related to various incidents (e.g., elections, school attendance, social conflicts).

Deliberate sampling has been considered a preliminary step in identifying patterns in online hate speech, an approach that has been already implemented by Meza, Vincze and Mogoshis (2018). Eventually, we discovered 55 Facebook posts with 2,083 comments and 12 YouTube videos with 5,122 comments. After the collection of comments, the clearing process resulted in 4,369 remaining comments, while 2,836 comments were excluded. The excluded comments included non-verbal elements (emoticons, punctuation marks), verbal elements that either indicated agreement-disagreement or presented irrelevant information (spam).

The main objective of this study is to investigate the representations of the Roma minority based on social media users' comments. The data analysis was performed via Qualitative Content Analysis (Mayring, 2014), in which we developed a categorical system by adopting an inductive open coding approach due to the exploratory design of the study. Two researchers involved in the process used CATMA, an online tool for computer assisted text markup and analysis. Upon the first round of analysis, the two researchers performed side-by-side comparisons to detect potential discrepancies. Additionally, Kappa statistic was employed to ensure the inter-rater reliability in the data analysis. Cohen's Kappa result for the inter-rater reliability was determined at $\kappa = 0.81$ ($p < 0.01$).

Results

The analysis of the comments resulted in forming categories that reflect the representations extracted based on the raw data material. For this reason, the titles of the categories follow the structure “Roma as... [negative social representation]”, where the negative social representation is a common term used in the comments of the specific category by the participants. Therefore, the titles were not attributed by us, rather we chose them based on the frequency of their appearance.

Roma as non-Greeks

In general, it seems that there is a very differentiated perception regarding the identity of the Roma minority, which shows that the general population either is not fully aware of their national identity or wants to express its cultural superiority over other groups that are considered inferior to the Greek mentality. In specific, Roma are perceived as people coming from Turkey, Mongolia, India, Bulgaria, Albania, Pakistan and Syria and certainly are not Greeks. For example, comments that reflect such views include: “*What are they? Turkish; Bulgarians? Pakistanis?*”, “*Roma are not Greeks! Those who call them Greeks should be ashamed*” and “*the bones of our ancestors will creak when such a person considers himself a Greek*”. Some of the comments, in fact, were rather preaching: “*send them all back to Mongolia*” or “*Here is Greece, this land belongs to the Greeks, if they want to be treated better, they must return to India*”.

Roma as “murderers” of the Greek language

Language has also been interpreted as a trigger for hate speech. Considering that the Greek language is inextricably linked to the Greek identity, as well as that the Roma are not considered Greeks (see earlier category), language signaled a differentiating dimension between “Us” and “Them”. Indicative comments of such views include: “*In which school did they learn this kind of Greek?*”, “*Now the gypsies understand what he is telling them?*”, “*Oh my God! They are definitely language killers.*” Likewise, some comments suggested that Roma could improve their Greek: “*They should start learning Greek by reading the instructions for the things they steal*” or “*If they are Greeks, should not they speak Greek fluently? Private lessons have not paid off yet.*”

The Roma as an ineducable group

The Roma are portrayed as a group that cannot be trained, mainly due to their reluctance. The comments also reflect views regarding school participation, as even in cases where Roma attend schools, there is an ultimate goal related to either receiving bonuses or positive discrimination (e.g., university admission with lower grades). Some comments that reflect these views are: “*Even if you give a hundred teachers to the gypsies, they will not be trained. They prefer a lazy and irresponsible life*”, “*Congratulations. Answer the multiple-choice questions, get 4000 points and pass :) Minority...*” and “*Even when they go to schools, they do it for social benefits. No hope*”. Similarly, users’ recommendations refer to actions and “sermons” addressed to Roma parents and/or the State: “*Take your children to schools in order to make them humans and do not teach them how to live like parasites*” or “*Build at least schools for them! Only for them!*”.

Roma as rejectors of social inclusion

Roma are considered a group that does not want to be integrated into the local community and, therefore, they self-ghettoize because of their own choices and resistance to change their way of life. The main argument behind these views relates to receiving social benefits and the broader belief that Roma are comfortable with not paying taxes and/or not working

legally. Some indicative comments include: *"They do not want to be integrated, because the current situation suits them well"*, *"I think Roma refuse to change their way of life"* and *"they do not care, all they want is benefits, they would rather starve, rather than working for an employer"*. Similar to the previous categories, there were comments that hinted at a "solution". The striking difference, however, in comparison with the previous categories, is that in this category there is always one main theme: *"they should either join the society or leave to other countries"*.

Discussion

The aim of the study was to examine the ways in which Roma are perceived and represented based on the analyzed online hate speech comments. Initially, it is apparent that online users use the term "gypsies" instead of "Roma" in the majority of the comments, which reflects a derogatory dimension in their speech, since the term "gypsies" implies a negative stereotypical term both in Greece, as well as in other EU countries (Council of Europe, 2012). In addition, the comments demonstrate a more general approach to a clear and delineated distinction between "Us" and "Them" (Joppke, 1996), as evidenced by the use of the first-person plural and the third-person plural, respectively.

Regarding the first category, it can be observed that the social media users adopt a superior attitude which provides them with the power to concede (or not) the Greek national identity to the Roma minority. However, the rest three categories reflect an attitude that puts the Roma in blame for not speaking the Greek language properly, not being willing to attend schools and integrate in the local society. This approach indicates a superior position for the non-Roma, which victimizes the Roma minority and automatically reproduces prejudices and stereotypes that are based on distorted and non-reliable subjective interpretations. Therefore, such arguments oversee the unequal distribution of social power without considering the broader social and historical context. To this regard, the internalisation of neo-liberalism has contributed to the de-politicisation of the root causes of the societal problems of minorities (Powell & van Baar, 2019). In this case, the hate speech narratives neglect a reference to the primary responsibility of the national policies for addressing social injustice timely and adequately, rather tend to relocate this responsibility from the community to individuals, who, in this case, become a minoritized group.

These findings highlight the need that all the negative social representations of Roma need to be interpreted through a broader perspective, beyond the Roma community, including the society as a whole. The content of the comments is a public form of speech that recalls and revives extremist ideologies, challenging the relevant policies for the integration and advocacy of basic human rights. Even compensatory support measures are being used to formulate arguments and inflame hate speech, as they reproduce and legitimize existing inequalities between institutions and the State, resulting in a more pronounced divide between Roma and non-Roma. Racism, along with the emergence of ethnocentric ideologies in Europe due to the ongoing economic crisis and the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, are posing threats on minorities' rights, pointing out that blind nationalism can prevent people from developing reflective and positive worldviews (Banks, 2011).

At a practical level, the present study can contribute to the learning material and topics of educational programs that address key issues such as hate speech, human rights and citizenship education. At the same time, dual-target programs "with and for the Roma" could be created, supporting individuals to develop their identity and connect with the

global community (Banks, 2012). Additionally, considering not only the widespread use of social media (as well as the media in general), but also the potentially harmful content that is easily created and disseminated through digital channels, critical digital literacy (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2014) can be a promising field for cultivating the skills and abilities of democratic citizens in the 21st century. Such suggestions could fill in the gap regarding initiatives that combine both critical and digital literacy with the aim of empowering Roma in specific and minorities in general.

Finally, concerning the limitations of the present study, these include the exclusive focus on anti-Roma hate speech, as well as the specific social media platforms that have been used. Deliberative sampling is also an important limitation of the present study, as we cannot assert that the data reflect the entire relevant online content. Moreover, acknowledging that hate speech extends to several other domains (e.g., elections, hygiene), future research could explore the additional negative representations that refer to the Roma minority. Additionally, we would suggest that future research could include the analysis of advocative comments towards the Roma, as well as of their interaction with hate speech comments.

Conclusions

The analyzed online hate speech comments reflect a sense of superiority of the non-Roma and specifically views that formulate anti-gypsyism. To this regard, Roma might be more vulnerable to their self-ghettoization due to the internalisation of the imposed sense of inferiority by the privileged non-Roma. Under these circumstances, both formal education and non-formal learning can act as enablers for building bridges between Roma and non-Roma groups both at educational and societal level. A systematic effort of raising awareness regarding Roma's rights, deconstructing prejudices and stereotypes, as well as reinforcing values for equality and justice, can gradually promote mutual understanding through an open-minded approach towards the 'Other' and mitigate online hate speech. In fact, online hate speech should be approached through the broader lens of managing hateful discourse, which poses several threats and triggers racist practices to all recipients without any exceptions. At the same moment, important questions arise regarding hate speech and freedom of speech, critical thinking, netiquette and the spectrum of truth. Disinformation, misinformation, mal-information, and propaganda seem to be apparent characteristics of our online and offline world, calling upon citizens to question, reflect and act based on valid and reliable information that lead to informed judgements. For instance, deciding to re-publish content that illustrates dis/mis/mal-information or hate speech feeds into a vicious circle, while a critical and reflective attitude would weaken this circle.

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